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Gods, Garrisons, and Governance

Resilience on Taiwan's Nangan Island

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Summary

This report examines religion on Nangan Island in Taiwan's Matsu archipelago as a feature of daily life shaped by three overlapping histories: the island's Fujianese cultural background, its Cold War militarization on the Taiwan-PRC frontier, and its post-1990s development as a heritage tourism site. It draws on a set of recent reference points, including the cross-strait Mazu statue exchanges of spring 2025 and the heritage designations issued separately by jurisdictions on each side of the strait, and considers how such events tend to be read against the more familiar narratives of mainland influence and cultural diplomacy. These connections both predate and operate alongside formal cross-strait policy in Taipei and Beijing. Relying on fieldwork from April 2026, the report then examines how this religious life has been gradually reframed as cultural heritage by both governments. Taken together, these layers suggest a quieter form of continuity, one that neither confirms nor refuses the political stakes others see in Nangan, but operates largely on terms of its own.

About the author

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Cover picture: Mazu of Nangan. A 28.8-meter granite statue of the sea goddess Mazu stands above Nangan Island, overlooking the Taiwan Strait and the archipelago that bears her name. (© Cao 2026).

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Introduction

In April 2026, fog moved across Nangan Island as it does most afternoons during “fog season” (霧季), typical conditions for the Matsu Island archipelago from February to May. The twenty-nine-meter granite statue of the Mazu goddess above vanished and reappeared within the hour. The Fujian coast, nine nautical miles to the north, did the same. At the airport, with the day’s flights to Taipei delayed and then canceled, the airport attendant looked up from their ledger and offered the only practical advice they had. “You’d better pray to the goddess,” they told me confidently. Neither of us treated it as a figure of speech. Residents move through these rhythms daily, without alarm. An outsider’s urgency, by contrast, begins to feel misplaced. The goddess, the attendant added, looks after her own.

Nangan harbor swallowed by fog on an April morning (© Cao 2026).

Politically, Nangan answers to Taipei; geographically and culturally, it faces Fujian. The island runs a ferry to the mainland nine miles away and worships a goddess whose ancestral temple sits on the Chinese coast, all while being governed from Taiwan. That mismatch, between political loyalty in one direction and everyday life in the other, is what makes Nangan a useful place to ask a sharper question. Taipei tends to ask whether cross-strait religious exchange has been weaponized by Beijing. Nangan invites a different question, and the one this report traces: how has an island taken its gods, its garrisons, and its governance, and made each of them into the materials of its own resilience?

This report draws upon fieldwork on Nangan in April 2026, including visits to temples, tunnels, and heritage sites; conversations with locals; and review of government documentation and tourism literature. “Matsu” within the Taiwan context is often used as shorthand for the whole Matsu Island archipelago, but the islands are not interchangeable. This piece is specifically about Nangan, the largest, most populous, and administrative center of Lienchiang County. A note on terminology: the goddess

and the islands share a Chinese name, written 媽祖 for the deity and 馬祖 for the archipelago, the two characters differing by a single radical ("horse" substituted for "mother") and pronounced identically. The romanizations diverge. "Mazu" follows Hanyu Pinyin, used in the People's Republic of China, while "Matsu" preserves the older Wade-Giles spelling retained by the Republic of China. Throughout this report, "Mazu" refers to the goddess and "Matsu" to the archipelago, in keeping with each side's differing conventions.

The Sword of Matsu Monument (馬祖劍碑), meant to resemble a sword (© Cao 2026).

Capital of the Periphery

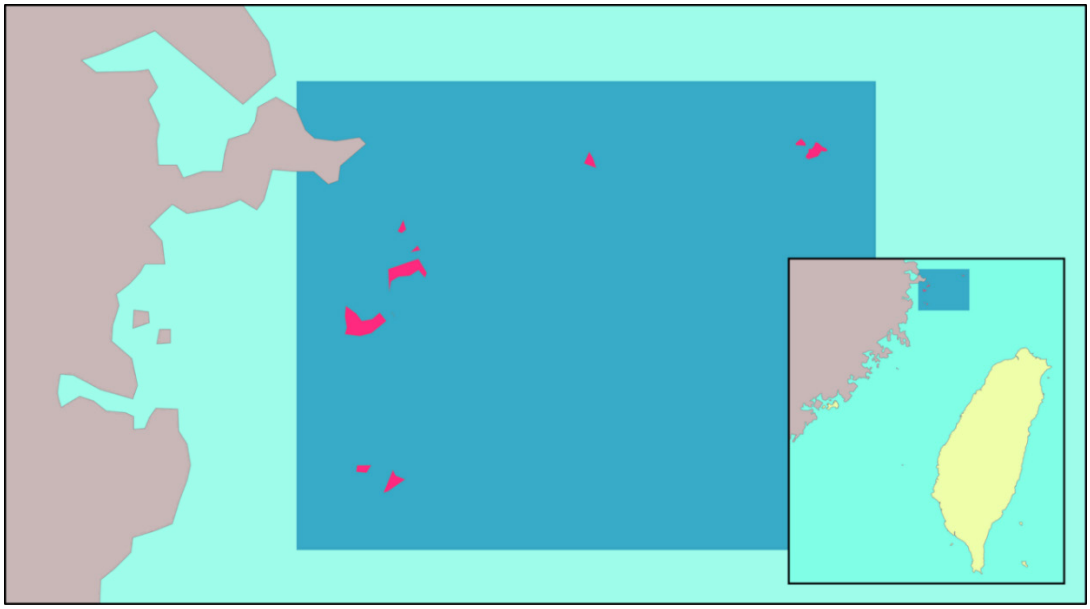
On many maps Nangan appears peripheral: a small island administered from Taipei and lying close to the Fujian coast. In practice, it is the seat of Lienchiang County government and the location of most of the archipelago's main administrative, religious, and cultural institutions. Within a few square kilometers sit the Matsu Tianhou Temple, the giant Mazu statue, the Beihai Tunnel, the headquarters of the Matsu National Scenic Area, and the Matsu Folklore Culture Museum. The Folklore Culture Museum, classified by Taiwan's Ministry of Culture as a history-and-humanities museum, presents itself as the site for understanding the "culture and lifestyle of Matsu."[1] The institutions charged with narrating the archipelago, to itself, to Taipei, and to mainland visitors, all sit on this island. When Taipei debates "Matsu" (regulating religious delegations, scrutinizing temple exchanges, handling cultural tourism), the case it is—often unknowingly—describing is Nangan's. As of late 2025, household registration

[1] Ministry of Culture (Taiwan), "Matsu Folklore Culture Museum (馬祖民俗文物館)," Museum Directory.

recorded fewer than fourteen thousand residents across the county's four townships, with the island of Nangan accounting for the largest share.[2]

That cartographic peripherality of the Matsu Islands is reproduced even in contemporary and recent literature on Taiwan. *The Taiwan Story*, a recent example, opens with a map titled "Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait" that renders the main island in detail, it marks Kinmen and the Penghu Islands but omits the Matsu archipelago entirely.[3] The omission is not idiosyncratic. Kinmen and Penghu have long passed into the standard visual of Taiwan, while Matsu falls outside that frame. The exclusion is consequential because such accounts foreground questions of identity, sovereignty, and the geography of cross-strait risk that an island like Nangan complicates rather than resolves.

Academic and researcher Paul Katz has periodized postwar Taiwanese religious governance in three phases: negative control, or suppression, from 1945 to 1960, management under the Chinese Cultural Renaissance from the late 1960s, and the embrace of local religious practices as cultural resources from the late 1990s onward.[4] Under this periodization, Nangan today operates squarely within the third phase. The state's posture toward popular religion is curatorial rather than restrictive, and the island's heritage economy runs on that posture.



Map of the Matsu Islands geographically relative to Taiwan and the Fujian Coast. By Luuva—Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0.

[2] Lienchiang County Civil Affairs Bureau, "Household Registration Statistics, September 2025."

[3] Kerry Brown, *The Taiwan Story: How a Small Island Will Dictate the Global Future* (London: Penguin Books, 2024), xv–11.

[4] Edwin A. Winckler, "Cultural Policy in Postwar Taiwan," in *Cultural Change in Postwar Taiwan*, ed. Stevan Harrell and Huang Chün-chieh (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 28–35.

Proximity, Dialect, and the Inheritance of the Sea

Nangan's settlement history binds the island to mainland China in ways no administrative lines can redraw. Migration from the Fuzhou region began in the Ming and Qing dynasties,[5] and the spoken language of Nangan remains a variety of Mindong (Eastern Min) closely related to the Fuzhou dialect.[6] A Chinese resident taking the Mini-Three Links ferry to Mawei, a direct cross-strait service inaugurated in 2001, arrives in a city whose linguistic environment more closely resembles their own than the Mandarin Chinese of Taiwan's Taipei.[7]

However, none of this is reducible to political allegiance. Signage at government offices pairs Mindong romanizations with Mandarin; county-funded school programs include Mindong modules; restaurants in Magang and Jieshou advertise Fuzhou-style fish balls, red-lees pork, and other dishes that place the island inside the Fujian culinary sphere. Cross-strait kinship is not experienced on Nangan as a policy question. That distinction matters analytically, as religion on Nangan does not have to do the work of aligning island life with mainland China. That alignment already exists at the level of language, kitchen, and kin. What religion does, and what makes it interesting, is to give public form to that alignment.

[5] Lienchiang County Government, Lianjiang Xianzhi 連江縣志 [Lienchiang County Gazetteer] (Nangan: Lienchiang County Government, 2014), 歷史志 [History volume].

[6] Jerry Norman, *Chinese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 228–238.

[7] Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area; Mini Three Links (小三通) inaugurated on 1 January 2001.

The Goddess Who Came Ashore

The 28.8-meter-tall Mazu (媽祖) statue above Magang Village, completed in 2009 and built from 365 granite stones (© Cao 2026).

The archipelago is named after the goddess Mazu. Lin Moniang, venerated after her apotheosis as Mazu, is the patroness of seafarers across the Chinese-speaking maritime world.[8] Nangan's claim on her is unusually intimate. Local tradition holds that after Lin Moniang died saving her father in a storm, the sea carried her body to Nangan's shore, where residents buried her and built a small temple. The Matsu Tianhou Temple in Magang still stands on that spot, and some locals believe that the goddess' remains lie beneath it.

In 2009, a 28.8-meter-tall statue of Mazu was completed on a hillside above Magang, built from 365 granite stones (one for each day of the year). The statue stands inside the Matsu Religious and Cultural Park, which also houses a ship-shaped observation platform and a ritual passage described in tourism material as a "blessing tunnel."[9]

A stele near the park states the claim without ornament: 媽祖在馬祖, "Mazu in Matsu." The homophonic pun is treated as substantive evidence rather than coincidence. Visitors to Matsu typically arrive first at the Tianhou Temple, present incense, and then walk up the steps to the statue viewing deck. The statue feels like a visual extension of the temple.

[8] P. Steven Sangren, "History and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy: The Ma Tsu Cult of Taiwan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 4 (1988): 674–697.

[9] Matsu National Scenic Area Administration, "Mazu Giant Statue and Religious Cultural Park (馬祖巨神像與宗教文化園區)".

"媽祖在馬祖" (Mazu in Matsu). A stone stele near the Religious and Cultural Park (© Cao 2026).

The festival calendar reinforces Nangan's claim on Mazu. The birthday ceremony on the twenty-third day of the third lunar month is the largest annual event in Magang, drawing delegations from sister temples across Taiwan and, increasingly, from Fujian and Southeast Asia.[10] Preparations begin weeks in advance and are distributed across the island's civic institutions: the temple committee sets the ritual program, the county's Bureau of Tourism coordinates lodging and transport for visiting groups, and neighborhood volunteers staff the offering tables. The line between religious observance and civic spectacle is, by local practice, soft.

The Mazu birthday is not the only ritual on the calendar. Each year, between the seventh day of the first lunar month and the fifth of the second, villages across the archipelago hold the Bai Ming (擺暝, locally "Beiman") ceremonies of the Lantern Festival: overnight feasts in temples and ancestral halls, followed by deity processions and the visiting of one shrine by another. The custom is documented at

[10] Lin Wei-Ping, *Island Fantasia: Imagining Subjects on the Military Frontline between China and Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 180–204.

some seventy-nine temples across the four townships; its origin lies in rural villages around Fuzhou rather than in the Han-Chinese ritual traditions of western Taiwan.[11]

In 2020, Taiwan's Ministry of Culture inscribed the Matsu Bai Ming Festival as the twenty-first item on its national register of important folk customs.[12] Over a decade earlier, in 2008, the People's Republic of China (PRC) had inscribed a paired form, the "Mawei-Matsu Lantern Festival" (馬尾－馬祖元宵節俗), on the second batch of its so-called national-level intangible cultural heritage list (ICH), framing the event as the country's first cross-strait national ICH project.[13] In doing so, two states with mutually exclusive sovereignty claims have, in effect, separately registered the same village rituals as their own national heritage. On the day of the festival, it is the villagers who carry the palanquins.

Meizhou Island, in Fujian, tells a parallel version of the same story. Meizhou is the site of Lin Moniang's birth and apotheosis, and is the ancestral Mazu site by nearly every measure of global veneration.[14] Kenneth Dean and Zheng Zhenman's long-term survey of the Putian region documents a dense, self-renewing network of village ritual alliances whose logic is not primarily political but which now provides the social infrastructure on which cross-strait religious exchange runs.[15] Meizhou and Nangan's claims are not competing ones: birth and death are both sacred, and Mazu is understood to have many homes. This coexistence is the condition under which joint ceremonies become routine, read on their face as religious continuity rather than diplomacy.[16] Political meaning is constructed from that readability later and elsewhere.

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[11] Matsu National Scenic Area Administration, "Lantern Festival Baiming Carnival (元宵擺暝嘉年華)".

[12] Bureau of Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Matsu's Baiming Carnival Listed as a National Folk Custom," news release, February 8, 2020.

[13] 国务院 [State Council of the People's Republic of China],「国务院关于公布第二批国家级非物质文化遗产名录和第一批国家级非物质文化遗产扩展项目名录的通知」["Notice on the Publication of the Second Batch of the National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage List and the First Batch of Extension Projects to the National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage List"], *Guo Fa* [2008] No. 19, June 7, 2008.

[14] James L. Watson, "Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou ('Empress of Heaven') along the South China Coast, 960–1960," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 292–324.

[15] Kenneth Dean and Zheng Zhenman, *Ritual Alliances of the Putian Plain*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), esp. vol. 1, *Historical Introduction to the Return of the Gods*.

[16] Michael Szonyi, *Cold War Island: Quemoy on the Front Line* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. chap. 3, "Politics of the War Zone, 1949–1960," 25–41.

The "blessing tunnel" entrance at the Religious and Cultural Park, with the carved couplet "祈福坑道" (blessing tunnel) and "慈航普渡" (the compassionate vessel ferries all to deliverance) on either side (© Cao 2026).

Mazu does not exhaust Nangan's religious geography. At Jinsha Tianhou Temple (津沙天后宮), in a small village along the southern coast, an image identified by residents as the only "Black-faced Mazu" (黑面媽祖) in the archipelago anchors a separate devotional circuit, situating Nangan inside a network of regional Mazu lineages rather than reducing it to a generic stop on a tourist itinerary.

The Niufengjing Wuling Temple (五靈公廟) on the northeast coast venerates the Five Spirit Lords (五靈公) as a separate belief system; two Christian congregations operate from the south: the Catholic Sacred Heart of Jesus Church (耶穌聖心天主堂) and the Methodist Matsu Wesley Church (馬祖衛理堂).[17]

A Landscape Still Shaped by the Garrison

From 1956 until 1992, Matsu was governed by Taipei under "battlefield administration" (戰地政務), a fused military-civil order imposed on Matsu and Kinmen that controlled movement, restricted fishing, and organized daily life around frontline defense. Martial law was lifted only in November 1992, ahead of the first civilian elections for county magistrate in 1994.[18] Nearly every visible feature of Nangan (roads, tunnels, slogans, the biographies of older residents) bears the imprint of that regime. Lin Wei-Ping's ethnography argues that the long frontline period produced not a population subordinated to

[17] Author's observation, Nangan, April 2026.

[18] Lin Wei-Ping, *Island Fantasia: Imagining Subjects on the Military Frontline between China and Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), esp. chap. 2, "Becoming a Military Frontline," 49–67; for primary diplomatic documentation of the early Warzone period, see Foreign Office Records, FO 371/115029 (1955) and FO 371/158472 (1961), The National Archives, Kew, UK.

the garrison but a community of "imagining subjects" who used religion, media, and local storytelling to construct alternative accounts of who they were and where they belonged.[19] The religious revival of the 1990s, in that reading, was not a departure from the Cold War but its inheritor.

The Folklore Culture Museum names the moment of transition with unusual specificity. The "Settlers" panel tells visitors that, on 19 August 1949, "a steam whistle announced the arrival of warships at the shore. Teams of Mandarin-speaking soldiers landed at the Matsu Islands and built all kinds of military defenses." The 74th Corps arrived first, the panel notes, mostly from the northern mainland and were Mandarin-speaking; the locals spoke Fuzhou dialect. The constant bombing across the strait did not cease until 1979, when the United States established diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China.[20] The exhibit places the linguistic encounter at the same level as the military one.

A temple guardian on Nangan (© Cao 2026).

Another structure emblematic of this dynamic is the Beihai Tunnel (北海坑道), a 640-meter underground waterway cut into Nangan's granite between 1969 and 1971 with explosives and hand tools. Built to shelter small naval vessels, the tunnel now admits visitors along a narrow concrete ledge

[19] Lin, *Island Fantasia*, esp. introduction, "Imagining Subject," 1–28, and chap. 9, "Novel Religious Practices as Imaginative Works," 205–238.

[20] Matsu Folklore Culture Museum (馬祖民俗文物館), permanent exhibit, "Settlers" display panel, Qingshui Village, Nangan, author's observation, April 2026.

above green water.[21] Several similar sites have been converted into heritage venues: Tunnel 88 (八八坑道), a former fuel depot; the Dahan Stronghold (大漢據點), carved into a headland; the Iron Fort (鐵堡), built onto a reef and accessible only at low tide.

The Cold War slogan ecology is more ambiguous. Above the military-era statue of Chiang Kai-shek at the observation point facing the Chinese coast, a 1970s declaration about soldiers sleeping on their weapons "awaiting the dawn" is still legible.[22] The road south of Magang carries another, low concrete sign that reads 軍民一家 同島一命, "army and people are one family; one island, one fate," half-swallowed by fog the afternoon I drove past. Above a roundabout near the county seat, a row of hexagonal panels reproduces the Matsu Defense Command's morale formula in six four-character lines: 警覺高 戰備全, 火力大 軍品足, 地形險 部署周, 訓練好 工事強, 信心夠 戰志堅 ("vigilance high, preparation complete; firepower great, supplies ample; terrain treacherous, deployment thorough; training good, fortifications strong; confidence sufficient, fighting will firm"). None of these have been removed and none have been refreshed either. Whether this counts as preservation that sanctions the old message, or preservation that quietly defangs it, is the kind of question the Nangan landscape forces observers to keep open, and a question younger residents are increasingly willing to pose aloud, treating such slogans as "grandparents' language": not to be erased, not to be restored, and not to be endorsed without translation.

[21] Matsu National Scenic Area Administration, "Beihai Tunnel (北海坑道)".

[22] 枕戈待旦 (zhěn gē dài dàn, "to sleep on one's weapon, awaiting the dawn"), a classical Chinese military idiom adopted by the Republic of China's military as a Cold War–era frontline morale slogan and inscribed on prominent walls and steles across the Matsu and Kinmen archipelagos; the most famous Matsu installation, above Fu'ao Harbor on Nangan, dates to a 1958 visit by Chiang Kai-shek. Author's observation, Nangan, April 2026.

From Soldier's Economy to Pilgrim's Economy

When martial law ended on Matsu in 1992, the islands faced the central question: what could replace the military economy? The formal answer was tourism, codified through the Matsu National Scenic Area in 1999 and accelerated by the Mini-Three Links in 2001.[23] The reopening of cross-strait pilgrimage to China's Meizhou, hesitant after 1987 and then rapid in growth, was one of the earliest channels through which ordinary islanders re-established direct contact with Fujian; Taiwanese scholarship of the period treated the Mazu revival as a leading indicator of what cross-strait civilian society would look like.[24] The tourism portfolio today has three layers: war heritage, religious heritage, and the "Blue Tears" (藍眼淚), a bioluminescent dinoflagellate phenomenon that lights the surf on dark spring and early-summer nights.[25] Visitors to the Mazu statue commonly arrive on tour packages that bundle a daytime temple stop with a nighttime Blue Tears boat tour.

The island markets itself along a double register. To visitors from Taiwan's Taipei, Taichung, and Kaohsiung, Nangan is framed as an exotic corner of their own country: war heritage, seafood, and goddess veneration. To visitors from China's Fujian and beyond, the framing emphasizes ancestral proximity. Both framings are accurate; both are productive for different actors with different purposes. That curation is visible in the printed material handed out at various tourist hotspots. The Matsu National Scenic Area Administration's Nangan brochure presents the island first as a "geopark," walking the reader through volcanic geology and granite outcrops before introducing temples, village industries, and bus timetables. Half-day routes alternate names ("Beihai Tunnel," "Mazu Statue," "Geology Park," "Magang Village") under a uniform mascot character and the ROC tourism logo. Religion is one layer in a stacked product.

Local business owners describe a sharp decline in pre-pandemic PRC tourism flows and a reorientation toward the Taiwanese domestic market. Some operators prefer the new mix; others speak of cross-strait visitors as "family," and describe the decline as a loss that was not only economic. Both positions appear in the same conversations, often from the same individuals.

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[23] Tourism Administration, Ministry of Transportation and Communications (Taiwan), "Establishment of the Matsu National Scenic Area (馬祖國家風景區)," 26 November 1999; "Taiwan's Matsu, Kinmen Eye Individual Tourists from China," Asia Pulse, 15 June 2011.

[24] Lin Wei-Ping, "Virtual Recentralization: Pilgrimage as Social Imaginary in the Demilitarized Islands between China and Taiwan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 1 (2014): 131–154.

[25] Matsu National Scenic Area Administration, "Blue Tears Ecological Information (藍眼淚生態資訊)".

Pictographic island map for visitors to the island pinpointing various tourist and cultural heritage sites (© Cao 2026).

A different kind of curation entered the calendar in 2022, when the inaugural Matsu International Art Island Biennial (馬祖國際藝術島) opened across all four townships. Conceived by chief curator Han Wu (吳漢中) as a ten-year, five-edition project, the Biennial uses military bunkers, tunnels, and traditional villages as exhibition venues: the same sites that anchor the religious and war-heritage tourism circuits.[26] The third edition, occurring in 2025, titled "Pha-Jiu: Your Ocean, My Land" (拍楸：你的海・我的島) after the Mindong fishing technique of anchoring nets to bamboo stakes (拍楸), installed work by fifty-five artist teams from nine countries along three curatorial axes: "Ocean, Island, and Frontline." Several pieces sat inside former military structures on Nangan, including the Tunnel 88 distillery complex and a converted observation post above Magang, putting visiting curators and visiting Mazu pilgrims through the same doors on the same afternoons.

The framework reaches past the festival itself. A "Northeast Monsoon Edition" (東北季風版) runs programming through the winter of 2025–26, treating the months that once cleared the islands of summer visitors as their own season; in 2026 a Matsu-recommended Taiwanese artist, Xin Qi (鋅奇) of Fake Fire Atelier, will install a commission on Sado Island, Japan, in what the two festivals describe as

[26] Matsu International Art Island Biennial (馬祖國際藝術島),official site; Tourism Administration (Taiwan), " Matsu Is Illuminated by Art with the Opening of the 3rd Matsu Biennial Festival," press release, September 2025; "2025 Matsu Biennial Kicks Off," Focus Taiwan, 5 September 2025.

the first sustained partnership between peripheral-island art programs across the East China Sea.[27] A fourth edition is scheduled for 2027, and the convening organizations (Lienchiang County Government and the General Association of Chinese Culture, 中華文化總會) have committed to keeping the cadence through 2031. The next eighteen months on Nangan are packed with programming, including the Bai Ming Lantern Festival cycle, culminating 20 February 2027, the Mazu birthday at Magang in late April, the Blue Tears season from roughly April through September, and the potential for a fourth Biennial later in the year.

Flying Mazu, Local Brokers, and the Portability of the Sacred

A distinctive feature of contemporary Mazu practice is its portability. Temple delegations travel in large numbers for ritual exchanges, and the goddess travels with them. Large Mazu statues have been flown as passengers on commercial aircraft between Meizhou and temples in Taiwan, with their own boarding passes (sometimes issued under the pre-apotheosis name Lin Mo) and first-class seats secured with specially fitted safety belts.[28] Pilgrims carry miniature figurines to the same end. The practice has been recognized within the broader tradition as a form of intangible cultural heritage.[29] Mazu is not a settled deity confined to one locality; she is the patron of anyone on the move. Nangan's identity as the island where the goddess' body came ashore takes its place within a network of sacred sites rather than above it. In a tradition whose operating metaphor is travel, everyone is always visiting.

The frame of reference for these decisions, as far as it can be observed from outside, is kinship among temples rather than strategy between states. A visiting delegation is evaluated against the history of past visits, shared elders, and devotion to the goddess. None of that framing is dishonest, but it is not the same as "No politics is happening." A cross-strait exchange of ritual personnel, publicized in local media and woven into a narrative of common devotion, can become raw material for actors who are not on the committees to build political meaning later. The sincerity of the committees is not the issue; the usability of the channel is. The skill on display is therefore social rather than ideological. It is the product of decades spent beside a powerful neighbor with whom Matsu shares most of a cultural vocabulary and almost none of a political one. What the committees have learned is how to move within the first register without being conscripted into the second.

That distinction is what separates a frontier religious landscape from a mass pilgrimage one. Mass pilgrimage lets political actors attach themselves to visible spectacle: the inauguration of a statue, the broadcast of a procession. Similar patterns have been observed on Kinmen, Taiwan's other frontline county, where temple exchanges with Xiamen play a comparable role.[30] What is specific to Nangan is size and scale: a single administrative center and the concentration of ceremonial authority in a handful of committees rather than across a broader associational field. The smaller the field, the greater the

[27] Sado Island Galaxy Art Festival, "Launching an International Collaboration with the Matsu Biennial," 17 December 2025.

[28] "Divine Departure: When Goddess Flies Commercial," *The World of Chinese,* 28 April 2025.

[29] UNESCO, "Mazu Belief and Customs (媽祖信俗)," Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, 2009.

[30] Michael Szonyi, *Cold War Island: Quemoy on the Front Line* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. chap. 11, "Ghosts and Gods of the Cold War," 181–198.

weight of each committee's invitation decisions. Over the coming decade, those decisions will fall increasingly to younger successors whose frames of reference were not formed under battlefield administration. Whether they will lean toward a more explicit Taiwanese identity, a more open embrace of Fujianese kinship, or some still-undeclared third register is the single most consequential open question for the island's religious life.

A Fuzhou-style Mazu temple on Nangan (© Cao 2026).

Conclusion

On Nangan, the religious infrastructure is optimized for cross-strait continuity. It speaks Mindong. It draws on Fuzhou architectural traditions. It venerates a goddess whose ancestral temple is on the mainland. It operates a ferry link directly to Fujian. None of these are flaws; they are what make Nangan itself. Taken together, though, they produce a setting in which cross-strait engagement is so ordinary that it barely registers as engagement, and in which any project pursuing closer political integration with the mainland finds most of its preparatory work already done. The same dynamic complicates the heritage-language question. Mindong is promoted with local pride as a marker of identity, and it is also the dialect that binds Taiwan's Nangan to China's Fuzhou in a way Mandarin does not. Cultural policy in a frontier region is not just about preservation.

Religious life on Nangan is conducted in two modes at once. The goddess who came ashore here is both the patroness of a self-contained local tradition, and the named figure of a network that extends across the strait to Meizhou and beyond. Residents shift between the modes without comment, the way a fisherman reads the wind. On a clear day, Nangan is obviously a border; on a foggy day, it is a community that minds its own affairs.

The Mazu statue dissolving into the afternoon fog above Magang (© Cao 2026).

In the same weeks in which this report's fieldwork was conducted, Xinhua, the People's Daily, and China Daily ran a coordinated cycle of features framed as "Praying to the Same Goddess: Mazu Belief Tightens Cross-Strait Bond," while representatives from approximately seventy-seven Taiwanese temples were

reported as attending the birthday observance at the ancestral Mazu temple on China's Meizhou.[31] The Matsu archipelago itself did not feature prominently in that cycle. The most religiously dense and linguistically proximate of Taiwan's offshore counties was apparently less useful to the narrative than larger temple delegations from western Taiwan. Whether this reflects editorial caution, the size of the archipelago, or the fact that Matsu's continuous cross-strait practice does not need to be coaxed into being remains an open question.

Policy language tends to reach for terms like "influence operations" and "cognitive warfare" when describing islands like this one. The labels capture something real but locate the action in the wrong register. Cross-strait influence, where and if it exists, does not depend on discrete acts of manipulation. It is produced or resisted through the unremarkable choices by which small places keep their lives running: who is invited, who is hosted, whose story is told at the next ceremony, whose boarding pass is printed for the next flight of the goddess.

The task is not to detect a conspiracy but to describe a form: a religious infrastructure built for maritime Fujian, conscripted by the Cold War, and now asked, without anyone quite willing to put the question that way, to carry the weight of a civilian cross-strait future whose contours remain unclear. The next opportunities to watch this form at work are already on the calendar: Bai Ming on 20 February 2027, the Mazu birthday at Magang in late April, and the fourth Matsu Biennial later in the year. As the fog rolls in and rolls out, the community itself decides what views to take seriously.

[31] "Praying to Same Goddess: Mazu Belief Tightens Cross-Strait Bond," *Xinhua*, 22 April 2026; reproduced in *China Daily* (23 April 2026), *People's Daily Online* (24 April 2026), and *The Borneo Post* (25 April 2026); see also "China Targets Taiwan's Temples, Matsu Worshippers in Influence Ops," *Radio Free Asia,* January 2024, reproduced in *Asia News Monitor*, 15 January 2024.

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